

China's trilateral aid cooperation has been growing in recent years along with its overseas development assistance program. As the largest emerging donor, China's trilateral aid cooperation with the United States (US), the leading traditional donor, and Timor-Leste presents an interesting example to examine this new model of aid delivery in the changing international aid landscape.

This trilateral project, together with the China–Australia–Papua New Guinea trilateral project on malaria control, and the China–United Nations Development Programme–Cambodia trilateral project on cassava, make up the three case studies for my PhD program on Chinese trilateral aid cooperation. It is the first trilateral aid cooperation between China and the US in Timor-Leste and in the Asia–Pacific region. This paper summarises some research findings arising from my fieldwork in Dili from January to February 2015.

## Project Summary

This project was initiated by the US and China in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) of Timor-Leste. At the fourth meeting of the US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing in May 2012, Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agreed that the two countries would conduct development cooperation in agriculture, health and human resources in other countries (US Department of State 2012). In the follow-up meetings in 2013, consensus was reached between China and the US to conduct trilateral aid cooperation on agricultural development and food security in Timor-Leste. A memorandum of understanding was signed in October 2013.

This small pilot project ran from November 2013 to December 2014. It was designed to strengthen capacity building in Timor-Leste's agricultural sector. Specifically, China and the US agricultural experts taught Timorese farmers the knowledge and skills to increase production of selected crops. China focused on maize while the US focused on beans and onions. Regular short-term classroom and in-field demonstration sessions were held at the agricultural demonstration plots. As a common practice of human resources training, China and the US contributed to the project by covering the training costs rather

than providing direct financial support to the Timor-Leste government. The Timor-Leste government contributed to the project by providing the field site for demonstration plots and training facilities, as well as organising farmers to participate in the training activities.

The main demonstration plot was located in Cotolau village, Aileu District. The three parties chose the site based on the scientific requirements for the growth of selected crops. Some training activities were also held at Timor-Leste National University (UNTL) and other agricultural bases in Aileu and Manatuto for the convenience of students and farmers. Chinese and US trainers worked side by side. More than 100 farmers, MAF extension workers and UNTL agriculture students participated in the training.

## Motivations

### United States

The US has shown deep interest in engaging China on global development, and trilateral aid cooperation has become a new type of partnership between the two donor countries. Regarding the China–US–Timor-Leste trilateral project from a development perspective, improving agriculture capacity and performance is a longstanding priority of USAID in Timor-Leste. As China has expertise in small-scale agricultural farming and recent experience in eradicating extreme rural poverty, cooperating with China provided an excellent opportunity for USAID to learn from China. From a diplomatic perspective, the US and China are working to build a new pattern of relationship between great powers. Development cooperation with China forms an important component of the broader US–China bilateral relationship. Trilateral aid cooperation with China, including this trilateral project in Timor-Leste, was included at the recent US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue meetings.

### China

Similar motivations are evident for China. The China–US relationship is one of the most important bilateral relations in China's foreign policy. China is working hard with the US to explore cooperation in a wide range of areas including development assistance and military cooperation so as to advance mutual interests and build healthy bilateral relations.

As Chinese President Xi Jinping articulated at the opening ceremony of the Sixth Round of China–US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in 2014, ‘Both history and reality have shown that the cooperation between China and the US will benefit both whereas confrontation will hurt both’ (MFA China 2014). Globally, the US is comfortably the largest and most influential traditional donor. Trilateral aid cooperation is being tested by China as a new way to engage with a traditional donor and promote mutual learning of aid expertise. As with the US mission in Dili, agricultural development is a focus of China’s aid in Timor-Leste. China has been assisting in introducing high-yield hybrid rice strains to Timor-Leste since 2008. This trilateral project is expected to combine the comparative advantages of expertise from China and the US to strengthen food security in Timor-Leste.

### Timor-Leste

Agriculture provides the main source of livelihood for Timorese people, and the *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030* (Timor-Leste government 2011) identified it as one of the pillar industries for economic development. Since independence, the Timor-Leste government has maintained close cooperation with both China and the US. It is interested in learning from the agricultural expertise of both countries, and adopting new techniques and varieties to enhance its own agricultural development. However, capacity remains a serious constraint on agricultural development in Timor-Leste. Through trilateral projects and similar initiatives, the Timor-Leste government expects to expand the knowledge and expertise of its own community farmers. Furthermore, with over 40 donors working in Timor-Leste, aid coordination is an ongoing challenge. This pilot trilateral project is embraced by the Timor-Leste government as a way to strengthen aid ownership and reduce duplication.

The Timor-Leste government takes great pride in this project. During the World Food Day celebrations in Timor-Leste on 16 October 2013, Timor-Leste President Taur Matan Ruak declared, ‘These two giant countries [the US and China] never work together. Only Timor-Leste can unite these countries under the trilateral cooperation in agriculture development’.

### Project Evaluation

This trilateral project provides lessons for future cooperation. Strong political support and concerted efforts from China, the US and Timor-Leste were

significant factors for the initiation of this project. During implementation, aid officials and experts from the three countries familiarised themselves with the ways each party delivered aid and developed skills to coordinate with each other in this new type of aid delivery. Agricultural knowledge transfer is evident: Timorese agricultural officials and students reported that they were delighted to learn agricultural expertise from China and the US, and some of them have begun to practise it. They expressed a strong desire for the continuation of the project.<sup>1</sup> At this stage, it is not known whether there will be a second phase of this project.

It is worth noting, however, that trilateral aid cooperation between China and traditional donors is in its infancy. Expansion to other projects requires considering issues including obtaining a good understanding of local conditions; promoting better coordination among the three parties, especially among donors; and examining the implications of trilateral aid cooperation for aid effectiveness.

### Author Notes

Denghua Zhang is a PhD candidate with SSGM. His current research investigates the reasons behind growing Chinese trilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade.

### Endnote

- 1 Data from my fieldwork interviews with Timor officials and students.

### References

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